FROM NOVEL TO FILM: IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE IN THE FILM ADAPTATIONS OF THE SELECTED NOVELS OF THE DIASPORA

A SYNOPSIS

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In the present study, immigrant experience in the film adaptations of the selected novels of the women writers of the Indian sub-continent will be examined with reference to Meera Syal's *Anita and Me,* Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices,* Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. The dissertation will be focused on shattering the conventional beliefs of considering film adaptations as secondary or inferior, and studying them more objectively as autonomous works in relation to the literary texts.

Since the works will be analysed in the light of the Adaptation theory, it is necessary to have a brief idea of the theory as it will help in the better understanding of the arguments put forward, which in turn will help in defining the objectives clearly. The Oxford English Dictionary defines Adaptation as "the action or process of adapting or being adapted." To adapt a work means "to adjust, to alter, to make suitable" (Hutcheon 4). However, in media context, Adaptation is defined as a movie, television drama, or stage play that has been adapted from a written work, typically a novel. Although quite inclusive, this definition appears to be somewhat incomplete. As noted by a famous Adaptation theorist, Deborah Cartmell, and others like Robert Stam and Alassandro Raengo, the contemporary theories of media adaptation are displaying "a shift towards the era of transmedia creation by multiple entities and media conglomerates." (Stam 128-129)

Adaptations are not new as they have existed since time immemorial. Thomas Leitch observes that the film adaptations of literary texts are as old as films. Virginia Woolf felt that adaptations demean, or demoralize the literary texts, and she considered the former as a "parasite" and the latter its "prey" or "victim" (Hutcheon 3). However, Adaptation theorists like to relate adaptations to translations, stating that just as translating does not mean slavish copying, similarly, an adaptation is also not a derivative, but a derivation. "Literature provides the raw

material for film adaptation to create new visual forms and thematic contents, there are several variations possible" (2), notes an early Adaptation theorist, Bela Balazs in his work, *Theory of the Film*.

Another theorist, Linda Hutcheon in her seminal work, *The Theory of Adaptation*, puts forward an argument that "a text can not only survive the shift from one form to another, but it can also thrive in ways not previously possible in the original form" (34). Referring to the theories of Imitation or Mimesis, she affirms Walter Benjamin's insight that, "story-telling is always the art of repeating stories" (2). Furthermore, she observes that:

> … the term adaptation has a multi-layered application referring simultaneously to, the entity or product which is the result of transposing a particular source; the process through which the entity or product was created (including reinterpretation and re-creation of the source); and the process of reception, through which we experience adaptations as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition and variation, or in other words, the ways in which we associate the entity or product as both similar to and a departure from the original. (7)

Robert Stam in his work, *Literature to Film*, observes the various factors that hamper the receptivity of the film: "logophobia" that discards the pictorial element in favour of the written word as the plot tends to be more intricate and the language more rich when the visual element does not intrude; "iconophobia," that is, the suspicion of the visual that concretizes and leaves less scope for the free-play of imagination; class prejudice; and "anti-corporeality," that is, distaste for the ways in which cinema manipulates the vision of the spectator. All these factors assert that films are better when they are completely faithful to the original, or that films fail to

impart details in a way as are provided by the novel, and put down adaptations as secondary, derivative, "belated, middle-brow, or inferior." (Naremore 6)

Such analysis traditionally focused on the notion of fidelity[1], however, recent trends focus on various other aspects across the transmedia model concentrating more on intertextuality[2] and pointing out the fact that adaptation helps in the survival of the original work, along with stating the idea that adaptation is as much an urge to consume, erase or question an adapted text as a desire to pay a tribute to it by re-interpretation and re-creation.

Although both the genres of film and literature are different and cannot evoke parallel responses, yet there are certain characteristics that they both share as both are participatory rituals that primarily aim at imparting aesthetic pleasure to the participants (readers/viewers). They both are works of art and share the common field of imagination and creativity on the part of the creators. Film theorist, Bruce Morrissette suggests that both the genres aim at conveying images, however, their way of doing that is different.

A successful adaptation, Hutcheon states, is the one which is "a repetition without replication" (4), the one which balances "the comfort of ritual and recognition with the delight of surprise and novelty" (25). Saying thus, Hutcheon presents the process of Adaptation (for films) as "the process of appropriation of taking possession of another's story" (10) and understanding the various elements in it: narration, time and temporality, themes, settings, and characterization, through one's own sensibility, using media techniques of cinematography, *mise-en-scene*[3], sound, and editing in order to "transcode" or "transpose" (4) them; subtracting or compressing

[1] In the field of Adaptation, Fidelity Criticism asserts that the source text has one correct meaning which the filmmaker either adheres to or tampers with. It implies a certain hierarchy where the literary text is the source and the film becomes a mere copy because the former appeared first. This assumption that older arts are generally better is what leads to considering adaptations as secondary.

[2] The concept was first issued by Julia Kristeva in her work, *Word, Dialogue and Novel* (1966).

[3] The term originally belongs to theatre and means 'putting on the stage', however, in film context, it can be said to mean, 'placing within the shot.' The elements that come under *mise-en-scene* are props, lighting, colour, costume, performance, and set location.

the story which is necessary in order to fit it in a limited time frame; deploying creativity, skills and techniques so as to make the text one's own, and thus, autonomous.

Adaptations are very popular in the present time as almost every third movie in the film industry is an adaptation of a popular novel mainly because of the appeal it provides in terms of its popularity and its story-line to the makers, the economic advantage it has which is due to the fact that it had already succeeded in being a national or an international bestseller, and the fact that it is a franchise on its own which provides less risk to its investors. It should also be noted that along with earning well at the box-office and gaining a lot of attention from the audience mainly on the social networking sites, most of these adaptations in the Hollywood make it to the Academy Awards.

The film adaptations chosen for this study are based on the novels of the women writers of the Indian and Bangladeshi diaspora. The aspect of immigration will be delved upon in the film adaptations of the selected novels. Though all the writers chosen for this study happen to be women belonging to the Indian sub-continent, writing on the aspect of immigration using English language as the mode of expression, yet the way they have dealt with this issue is different owing to their personal experiences, and their socio-cultural environment.

Migration was a common phenomenon in the 20th century with people moving from their native lands to the distant ones in search for better opportunities in the course of which they adopted the culture, language, and traditions of the foreign land as their own. A major migration to the US and Canada took place after India got its independence in 1947 that initially consisted of ex-servicemen who had served overseas with the British forces and were now looking for better prospects. They took to working in the railways, dairy farms, orchards, and restaurants. In the 1970s and 1980s, various highly educated, skilled professionals from India migrated to the

developed countries of US, Canada, and UK in the hope of better opportunities. They acquired middle, and upper-middle class status in the foreign land in a relatively short time. However, as they found themselves in a completely different culture, it became difficult for them to assimilate with the foreigners; to preserve their own culture while practicing and adopting the ways, beliefs, language and lifestyle of the people of foreign lands.

The contemporary diasporic writer functions quite differently from the writer of the past. While the pre-independence Indian writer abroad worked through nostalgia, memory, and a possible dependence on Indian philosophy, creating a mythical past from them, or alternatively, a return to India and a redefining of the self within the trope of patriotism, the writer of post-independence period works through other constructions which can be broadly categorized as exotica, history, fantasy, collision, and use of a third space.

As the second wave of migration in the 1970s and 1980s had people from the Indian sub-continent willingly migrate to the distant lands in search for better career opportunities, a new tradition in diasporic writing emerged. The writers living abroad started writing about immigrant experiences in order to preserve their identity, to be visible to the host culture as a person with a meaningful, valuable past.

The women immigrant writers seek their audiences globally, but are also at the same time engaged in preserving their subjectivity, and difference along with their marginality. The works of most of these writers tend to create a two-way connectivity. The first generation immigrant writers have their memories involved with their past in active association. The process of migration at once provides them with two homelands- one they have known and experienced physically, and the other remembered through cultural arte-facts, twice or thrice removed tales, and the words that are present in their everyday discourse echoing a faraway past. The second

generation immigrant writers on the other hand, write about their situation in cross-cultural contexts, that is, state of 'in-betweeness.' The 'foreign' land for the first generation immigrant is technically the 'native' land for the second generation immigrant, and so the latter is associated with his/her 'roots' in a passive manner[4]. The aspect of migration has both erased and re-inscribed patterns of being and belonging, thus producing a self with multiple and partial identification that is at once both individualized as well as community-oriented. Though all the four women writers chosen for this study are directly not in contact with the reality of India, yet they tend to write about it through their own sensibilities.

Meera Syal in her works focuses on the theme of generational change, cultural accommodation and interconnections between the home and social culture. Born in 1961 in England to Punjabi parents, she is a second-generation immigrant writer who is known for her works like, *Anita and Me* (1996), and an autobiography, *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (1999).

Syal's semi-autobiographical, Betty Trask Award-winning novel, *Anita and Me* is the story of a 12-year old, British-Punjabi girl, Meena Kumar and her relationship with her 14-year old English neighbour, Anita Rutter as they grow up in the working-class, fictional mining village of Tollington in the Black Country in the 1970s. Belonging to the only Asian family in the village, Meena finds it hard to fit in the predominantly-white neighbourhood, as her Indian heritage keeps on resurfacing, and so, she feels caught in the flux of cross-cultural crisis.

A prominent Indian-American writer, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in Kolkata in 1965, and is known for her works, *Arranged Marriage* that won the American Book Award in 1995, *The Mistress of Spices* that was short-listed for the Orange Award, *Sister of My Heart*, *Palace of Illusions*, and *One Amazing Thing*. She attained her degree in B.A. from the University

[4] They get to know their 'roots' mainly through the depiction of their culture, religion, and traditions provided by their family/community living abroad.

of Calcutta; moved to US in order to pursue higher education in literature, and has remained there ever since, teaching at various institutes, including the University of Houston, and working for *Maitri*, the South Asian women helpline against domestic abuse. Her own life and experiences as a first-generation immigrant in the US have been a major influence on the writer and that is why her novels largely focus on the experiences of South Asian immigrants, delving into the themes of cultural gap, predicament of women, and longing for native land.

The Mistress of Spices (1997) by Divakaruni is a blend of reality and supernatural; a sort of hybrid that provides a combination of immigration, multiculturalism, feminism, racial intolerance and magic realism. It tells the story of an Indian immigrant, Tilottama who is trained in magic and owns a shop at the Spice Market in Oakland, California where she helps her customers through the mystical properties of spices. She meets an American named Raven and falls in love with him, thus disregarding the rules of her training in being the 'Mistress of Spices' that results in the spices inflicting punishment on her and on those about whom she cares.

Another immigrant writer, Nilanjana Sudeshna "Jhumpa" Lahiri, born on July 11, 1967 in London, England is a famous Indian-American author known for her works like, *Interpreter of Maladies* that won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in the year 2000, *The Namesake* (2003) that was adapted into an eponymous film, and *The Lowland* that was nominated for the Man Booker Prize in 2013.

Though born in London to immigrant parents, Lahiri spent most of her life in US, and due to this reason she calls herself an American. Apart from being a Literature student that exposed her to the works of writers like Hardy, Tolstoy, William Trevor, Alice Munro and Mavis Gallant, her personal life and the world around her had been a major influence on Lahiri. Her works deal with the Indian-American experience, particularly of the Bengali families as she

happens to be a Bengali herself. Thus, most of her literary works explore the sensitive themes of dilemma over the loss of homeland, cultural gap, disconnection between the first and second generation, the problem of dual identity faced by the second generation, and marital discord.

The Namesake is the first novel by Lahiri that explores themes of cultural alienation, loss of identity, family and love. It depicts the story of a Bengali couple, Mr. and Mrs. Ganguli, who leave their homeland in India to settle abroad for better opportunities. Through a series of errors, their son's nickname, Gogol becomes his birth name, and due to this reason, various aspects of his life are shaped accordingly. Informed by her own experiences as a second generation immigrant, the novel addresses the anxieties and struggles of Indian-American immigrants and the deeply felt cultural gaps they encounter in a country different from their homeland.

Born in Dhaka in 1967, Monica Ali is known for her works like, *Brick Lane* (2003) that was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, *Alentejo Blue* (2006), and *In the Kitchen* (2009). Ali was 3 years old when her family moved to Bolton in London, where she completed her primary education, after which she went to Oxford University to study Philosophy, Politics and Economics. She lives in London and was selected as one of the "Best of Young British Novelists" by *Granta* magazine in 2003.

Ali's own social background and education have been major influences on the writer. Her works locate Muslim community from Bangladesh in its diasporic space, exploring the themes of identity, familial relationships, and belonging. During the 1970s, various Bangladeshis immigrated mainly from the north-eastern part of the country named Sylhet, to UK in search for better opportunities, and settled primarily in the East London boroughs. They are commonly referred to as British Bengalis and form one of the UK's largest immigrant groups, along with being one of its youngest and fastest growing communities.

Bangladeshis residing in the UK form a largely homogeneous society. Although there is high rate of unemployment, overcrowding and problems related to health, yet the British Bengali community, mainly the second generation is trying to establish itself in the mainstream of commerce and politics. Majority of the first generation immigrants regard Bangladesh as their ancestral home and try to preserve their culture in the foreign land by encouraging the younger generation to learn their native tongues, Sylheti and Bengali. They share a family-oriented community culture and celebrate significant Bengali events like the *Baishakhimela* (which is celebrated annually) in order to forge the communal bond and identity. Brick Lane, a street in the London borough of Tower Hamlet where the Bangladeshi immigrants reside in large numbers is the main destination where the celebrations are held throughout the day.

Ali's debut novel, *Brick Lane* tells the story of a young Bangladeshi girl, Nazneen Ahmed who, after her mother's death, is married off to a man twice her age in the borough of Tower Hamlet in London. She tries to adjust in the new land but the memories of the past related to her younger sister Haseena left behind in the homeland in Gouripur keep resurfacing in her present life. The novel problematizes cross-cultural crisis against the backdrop of violence and conflict involving the issues of race and religion.

The study of the aspect of immigration is not limited to the genre of literature alone. Since the 1980s, the cultural scene has been bristling with talk of crossover films. These films form a broad category in themselves as they are engaged in an ongoing dialogue with their culture of origin. How the meaning in the film is shaped, and what they profess is dependent on a number of factors like the location and nationality of the filmmaker, budget, film techniques at the disposal of the filmmaker, and target audience.

The eponymous film adaptation of Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* was produced in 2002 by Paul Raphael under the direction of the British filmmaker, Metin Huseyin, with the screenplay written by Syal herself. A straight[5] adaptation of the novel, the film is 92 minutes in length, and stars Chandeep Uppal and Anna Brewster in the leading roles of Meena and Anita, respectively. The film garnered mixed reviews from the critics at the time of its release and can be considered as a chapter in the life of a young girl trying to identify her roots in an alien environment, experiencing the sense of double-consciousness amidst the underlying racial tensions to which she is exposed.

The film adaptation of Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* with the same name as that of the novel was released in 2005 under the direction of Paul Mayeda Berges with the screenplay of the same written by his wife, Gurinder Chadha. Chadha is a British national who traces her origin in India, and possesses an interesting oeuvre of films dealing with diasporic Indian experience wherein she captures the trials and tribulations in the lives of the Indians living abroad. The film adaptation under discussion follows the plot of the novel to a great extent, using the metaphor of spices as self-orientalising devices. Chadha and Berges have created a beautiful interracial love story set against the multicultural, cosmopolitan backdrop of the US. The film is 91 minutes in length, and stars Aishwarya Rai Bachchan and Dylan McDermott in the leading roles of Tilottama and Raven, respectively.

The eponymous film adaptation of Lahiri's *The Namesake* was produced in 2006 under the direction of Mira Nair with the screenplay of the same written by Sooni Taraporevala. Born in 1957 in Odisha, Nair is an internationally acclaimed director of *Monsoon Wedding*, *Salaam*

[5] Adaptations can be categorized as straight and loose, that is, the one that retains the original plot of the movie, and the one that deviates from the original plot in a manner that the names of the characters, time period or setting are altered and the story is presented in a different manner. Although different, both the categories are considered valid as per the assertion of the Adaptation theorist, George Bluestone.

Bombay, and *Mississippi Masala*. She teamed up with her old friend, Taraporevala to produce an 'in-between' film suffused with loneliness, nostalgia, and the anguish of the first-generation immigrants. Taraporevala's screenplay follows the story of an Indian immigrant's son who wants to assimilate with the New York society, struggling to get away from his family's traditional ways in the process. The film was presented the Darmouth Film Award, and was also honored with the Pride of India award at the Bollywood Movie Awards. It is 117 minutes in length and stars Irrfan Khan and Tabu in the roles of the first-generation immigrants, Ashok Ganguli and Ashima Ganguli, respectively, and Kal Penn and Sahira Nair in the roles of their second-generation, America-born children, Gogol Ganguli and Sonia Ganguli, respectively.

The film adaptation of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* with the same name as that of the novel was produced by Ruby Films in 2007 under the direction of Sarah Gavron, with screenplay written by Laura Jones and Abi Morgan, and stars Tannishtha Chatterjee in the lead role of Nazneen. It is 101 minutes in length, and provides an account of the immigrants' lives, examining the role of women in the multicultural community. The film adaptation moves to and fro from the lanes of Nazneen's adopted land, to the alleys of the land of her origin, thus exploring the British-Bengali immigrant experience. Gavron did her directorial debut with *Brick Lane*, and was nominated in the category of the Best Director at the BAFTA Awards for her work in this movie.

The genres of Film and Literature explore the nuances associated with the aspect of cross-cultural crisis by their own means and strategies. Both the genres are different, but as both are the works of Art, they aim at achieving the common purpose of providing aesthetic pleasure to the readers/viewers. Both create an illusion of reality and try to provide a sort of message for the ethical development of the audience through the depiction of a well-developed story using

their respective techniques- a writer of the novel uses his creative imagination in words and develops the story where as the film uses the techniques of cinematography, *mise-en-scene*, sound and editing to do the same.

Film adaptations cannot be studied alone as the sense that they are 'adaptations' will always prevail. The two media of literature and film are quite different, and so, instead of finding out which art form is better, a healthy discourse would be to study the common grounds between them. It is generally believed that the 'spirit' or the soul of the source text should be captured by the adapter for an adaptation to be successful. However, this aspect is too abstract to theorize but the other one of 'story' is considered as the "common denominator" (Hutcheon 6), the core element which is transposed or transcoded across different media. Therefore, going beyond the Fidelity Criticism, the present study focuses on analyzing the selected film adaptations on the basis of five common elements between the genre of literature and film, that is, Narration, Time and Temporality, Theme, Setting, and Characterization in order to compare the film adaptations with their source texts and assess whether the film has been able to transpose the immigrant experience from the novel succeesfully or not.

To the best of my knowledge and understanding, this kind of study has not been conducted by any other researcher till now, though a few research papers have been written separately on the three chosen film adaptations, namely, *Anita and Me*, *The Mistress of Spices*, and *The Namesake*. The researcher hopes that exploring the relationship between literary texts and cinema will certainly open new domains of knowledge in the field of literature. Thus, the objectives of the proposed dissertation would be:

1. To make a detailed study of the Adaptation theory.

2. To make a critical study of the aspects of immigration with reference to the Indian and Bangladeshi diaspora.
3. To make a critical study of the socio-cultural background and influences that helped in enhancing the creative talents of Syal, Divakaruni, Lahiri, and Ali.
4. To make a comparative study of the portrayal of immigrant experience in the film adaptations of the selected novels of Syal, Divakaruni, Lahiri, and Ali.
5. To critically analyse the socio-cultural message provided by the film adaptations.

Keeping in view the above objectives, the chapter scheme would be as follows:

I. Introduction

   Part A: Adaptation Theory

   Part B: Milieu and the Artist

II. Dilemma of Divided Loyalties: A Critical Analysis of Syal's *Anita and Me* and its Film Adaptation

III. Exoticism of Homeland: A Critical Analysis of Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* and its Film Adaptation

IV. Transnational Belonging: A Critical Analysis of Lahiri's *The Namesake* and its Film Adaptation

V. Cross-Cultural Crisis: A Critical Analysis of Ali's *Brick Lane* and its Film Adaptation

VI. Conclusion: Crossing Over the Textual Frontiers

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